

The impossible, essential task of writing poetry after Auschwitz

Bearing witness, challenging God, voicing lament

by [Jill Peláez Baumgaertner](#) in the [November 20, 2019](#) issue



Getty Images

When I was 16 I visited the Dachau concentration camp in southern Germany and confronted a horror I had up to then never imagined. This was in 1964, at a time when accounts of the Holocaust were not as accessible as they are now. After that teenage confrontation with Dachau I have at times intentionally separated myself from the literature that describes the Holocaust because it pushes me into an abyss and makes me question God's reality in the midst of unspeakable suffering.

This past summer, over 50 years after that first encounter with the Holocaust, I joined a group of Christians and Jews on a trip to visit some of the death camps and killing fields in Poland. We read aloud names of the dead as we stood next to one of the mass burial sites. At Auschwitz, Birkenau, Majdanek, and Treblinka, we paused to read scripture. We paused at some places to read poems.

As a poet, a poetry editor, and a teacher of poetry, I have often found myself haunted by a statement German philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno made in the late 1940s: "It is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz." Adorno was a Jewish refugee who fled to the United States but returned to Germany after the war. He was a learned critic of fascism who studied authoritarianism and anti-Semitism.

What does Adorno mean by saying that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric? Perhaps he is saying that after the Holocaust writing poetry is an indulgence and a luxury that one cannot afford. Or perhaps that poetry could never represent the immensity of Holocaust savagery and can only trivialize its horrors, and so should not be attempted. Perhaps he means that something so monumentally evil could never inspire art, because the purpose of art is to bring order out of chaos, and there is no order to be brought out of this chaos. Perhaps Adorno is suggesting that the only possible response to such a horror is wordlessness. And isn't it an act of futility for any writers to think they could make someone who was not there understand or feel even a small portion of what was experienced by those who died at Auschwitz or who against all odds survived?

There is no question that the Holocaust has been trivialized. One way it can be trivialized in poetry is by being used as a metaphor. This is what happens in Sylvia Plath's vastly admired poem "Daddy," where she compares her father to a black shoe and a swastika and herself to a victim in the transport train. This use of the Holocaust is more than insensitive—it is scandalous. Plath uses the Holocaust as a way to understand her experience of being abandoned by her German American father when she was eight years old, as if it could be compared to the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany.

An attempt to kill her memory of her father, the poem also is highly suggestive of her desire to separate herself from God. When her father died, she said, "I'll never speak to God again." She imagines her father as "an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew, / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen." Her father is

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

The poem makes the profound error of seeing the suffering of one American girl of privilege through the lens of the suffering of millions.

The Holocaust can also be exploited to make political points. An example is the way the animal rights group PETA in 2004 used images of victims of Nazi concentration camps to compare meat-eaters to Nazis. I've also seen a Facebook post on the current refugee crisis that juxtaposed an image of a child killed in Auschwitz with an image of a baby born in a refugee detention center. Both of these examples turn Holocaust victims and survivors into concepts and abstractions, erasing their individuality and thereby erasing the reality of their suffering. As one critic commented, "The child that you see in the Facebook picture wasn't born so she could be conveniently used as imagery that simplistically compares her suffering with someone else's. She had a name—Czesława Kwoka—and she died in Auschwitz at the age of 14 in fear and terror. The photo of her speaks of her own lost life, one that was brutally cut short in a specific context. When we remove it from this historical frame, we are appropriating her death."

Despite all the dangers and difficulties of writing about the Holocaust, I've come to believe that it is not only possible but essential. What changed my mind is the discovery of the poets who have done it brilliantly. These poets provide the kind of witness that even film documentaries cannot rival because they put the reader in the place of both perpetrator and sufferer.

For example, there is the work of Charles Reznikoff, who was raised in Brooklyn by immigrant parents who had fled the pogroms in Russia. In a book titled *Holocaust*, Reznikoff uses as source material the transcripts of the trials of Nazi leaders, including the Nuremberg trials (1945-1949) and the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961. In this striking example of "found poetry" he offers an objective telling of facts.

One of the S.S. men caught a woman with a baby in her arms.

She began asking for mercy: if she were shot
the baby should live.

She was near a fence between the ghetto and where Poles lived
and behind the fence were Poles ready to catch the baby
and she was about to hand it over when caught.

The S.S. man took the baby from her arms

and shot her twice,
and then held the baby in his hands.
The mother, bleeding but still alive, crawled up to his feet.
The S.S. man laughed
and tore the baby apart as one would tear a rag.
Just then a stray dog passed
and the S.S. man stooped to pat it
and took a lump of sugar out of his pocket
and gave it to the dog.

This is a poetry without metaphor, a poetry of pure witness.

In the section of *Holocaust* on children, Reznikoff writes in a similar style:

Frightened but quiet,
the children came down in groups of fifty or sixty to eighty;
the younger children holding on to older ones.
They were taken upstairs to empty halls—
without any furniture
and only dirty straw bags on the floor, full of bugs:
children as young as two, three, or four years of age,
all in torn clothes and dirty,
for they had already spent two or three weeks in other camps,
uncared for
Many had diarrhea
but they were not allowed in the courtyard
where the water-closets were;
and, although there were chamber pots in the corridor of each story,
these were too large for the small children.
.....
the women had no soap to clean the children,
no clean underwear to give them,
and only cold water with which to wash them.

In poem after poem, Reznikoff simply documents the savagery. Paul Auster has called Reznikoff “the poet as a solitary wanderer, as man in the crowd, as faceless scribe.” A later book, *Testimony: The United States (1885-1915); Recitative*, is

similarly conceived, using trial transcripts to tell the dark history of racism and poverty in the US.

Another example is the work of Dan Pagis, who was born in Romania in 1930 and sent to a Nazi concentration camp in Ukraine when he was 11 years old. He escaped from the camp in 1944 and eventually ended up on a kibbutz in Israel. Though he began publishing poetry in 1959, he did not write about the Holocaust until his third book, *Gilgul (Transformations)* came out in 1970. His most famous poem is a short one, later chosen to be inscribed on a slab at the Belzec death camp memorial in Poland.

Written in Pencil in the Sealed Boxcar

here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my other son
cain son of man
tell him that i

This poem is claustrophobic, airless. The poem is itself a sealed boxcar with no escape. The poem is not a metaphor but an enactment, placing the reader inside that boxcar along with Abel and along with Eve, the mother of all humanity, who is going to be murdered but who is leaving a testimony, her words on the walls of this railroad car. It's a message written in pencil, which can be erased—just like the Jewish people during this time. Why does the message break off? We don't know. We want an answer and there is none, just as there is no meaning that can be derived from the experience described. There is no closure to this poem; there are no answers. It turns back on itself, endlessly repeating the first murder by Cain of Abel that underlies it all. That murder has not yet taken place because Abel still lives within the poem, but the murder is imminent, as are all the atrocities that will follow in history, culminating in this most unimaginable genocide.

In another poem Pagis imagines reparations to the dead, which of course is an absurdity. What could ever be given to those who suffered to compensate them for their suffering? The only sufficient reparation would be for them to have their lives back. In a poem titled "Draft of a Reparations Agreement," Pagis imagines God reluctantly offering a deal:

All right, gentlemen who cry blue murder as always,
nagging miracle-makers,
quiet!
Everything will be returned to its place,
paragraph after paragraph.
The scream back into the throat.
The gold teeth back to the gums.
The terror.
The smoke back to the tin chimney and further on and inside
back to the hollow of the bones,
and already you will be covered with skin and sinews and you will live,
look, you will have your lives back,
sit in the living room, read the evening paper.
Here you are. Nothing is too late.
As to the yellow star:
it will be torn from your chest
immediately
and will emigrate
to the sky.

God, imagined as responding only to nagging, promises the victims a resurrection into their former lives. "You will have your lives back," he says. And here the Holocaust is a film run in reverse—gold restored to teeth, yellow stars ripped from chest, disappearing into the air like the ashes from the ovens. It is of course a ridiculous, impossible idea. That it is only a draft of an agreement suggests that perhaps this draft will not be accepted. The title also suggests that the earlier covenant God had with the Jewish people was also only a draft.

One of the best-known poems of the Holocaust is by Paul Celan. Born in Romania, he saw his parents deported to Auschwitz and survived several camps before escaping and eventually settling in Paris. In "Todesfuge" ("Fugue of Death") he writes, "Black milk of the morning we drink it evenings / we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night / we drink and drink / we are shoveling a grave in the air there you don't lie / cramped . . ." The white milk that gives life turns black as the air turns dark from the smoke of the ovens. In a terrible irony Celan points out that if your grave is the smoke of cremation in the air, then at least you are not cramped into a small grave in the ground. One critic has called this poem a "splintering of

perspectives.” The poem is a fugue, intertwining and juxtaposing perspectives, emphasizing how the Holocaust cannot be represented objectively or from a single point of view.

Celan also wrote the shocking poem “Tenebrae,” titled after the Good Friday service in which darkness gradually increases and becomes all pervasive:

We are near, Lord,
near and at hand.
Handled already, Lord,
clawed and clawing as though
the body of each of us were
your body, Lord.
Pray, Lord,
pray to us,
we are near.

Here the victims blame God for deserting them in their deepest need. The speakers demand that God pray to them, the victims, for his own salvation; their accusations can erase him. It’s a poem of almost blasphemous power, with the body and blood of the Eucharist transformed into the blood of those who died in the gas chambers, the blood of the victims erasing the Lord who forced them to drink it in their death.

Even the figure of Hitler can be handled by a great poet, such as Wisława Szymborska, the Nobel Prize-winning Polish writer. In her early life she revised her poems to the demands of Stalinism, but she later shook off the bondage of political expediency and her own voice emerged.

In “Hitler’s First Photograph” she presents a chilling portrait of a “little fellow in his itty-bitty robe / That’s tiny baby Adolf, the Hitlers’ little boy! . . . Precious little angel, mommy’s sunshine, honey bun.” She continues: “Our bouncing boy, thank God and knock on wood, is well, / looks just like his folks . . . / like the tots in every other family album.” This chilling picture of a type of Rosemary’s baby, biding his time in apparent innocent babyhood until his full evil can be unleashed, points to the unspeakable horrors dormant in the unformed soul. “No one hears howling dogs, or fate’s footsteps,” she writes and ends with the image of “a history teacher [who] loosens his collar / and yawns over homework.”

This image of the events of history looming over us and yet ignored appears in another of her poems, "Hatred":

Since when does brotherhood
draw crowds?
Has compassion
ever finished first?
Does doubt ever really rouse the rabble?
Only hatred has just what it takes.

Gifted, diligent, hard-working.
Need we mention all the songs it has composed?
All the pages it has added to our history books?
.....
It has a sniper's keen sight
and gazes unflinchingly at the future
as only it can.

In her poem "Could Have," she also writes about the randomness, the meaninglessness, and the lack of individual agency that was part of the Holocaust:

It could have happened.
It had to happen.
It happened earlier. Later.
Nearer. Farther off.
It happened, but not to you.

You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others.
On the right. The left.

.....
So you're here? Still dizzy from another dodge, close shave, reprieve?
One hole in the net and you slipped through?
I couldn't be more shocked or speechless.
Listen,
how your heart pounds inside me.

Somehow, amidst the random events and coincidence, the good and bad luck, is a human connection—“your heart pounds inside me.” Szyborska shows not only empathy but also her conviction that we are living each other’s stories. This is what poetry can open to us.

So can poetry be written after Auschwitz? The evidence says that it can. At least there is poetry written after the Holocaust and about the Holocaust that forces us to confront the horror and resist answers. There is poetry that bears witness to unspeakable acts. There is poetry that challenges God for the sake of humanity in a profound way. Above all, there is poetry that allows and encourages lament. One thing these Jewish writers have in common is that they understand that lament is not faithlessness but rather an act of faith. The poet spills out grief, anger, and rejection of God—to God, and before God.

The day our group visited Treblinka we read a poem of lament by the Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein. The final stanza of “Lamentations for the Souls of Jewish Cities” reads:

Don't try to convince yourself
That this can be forgiven.
Don't try to convince yourself
That in the most beautiful
buildings raised,
This evil can be forgotten.
See, already the face of the world
Is crooked, monkey-wrinkled.
Hear, already one can't
comprehend
The other's tongue.
Behold, higher and higher they build
The tower of devastation.
Go and see
If the face of the world reveals
A single sign of gentle yiddishkayt.
Read the books and gape:
Erased are
All the letters of mercy

All the letters of the book.

A version of this article (which was edited on November 21) appears in the print edition under the title "Poetry after Auschwitz."